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RETHINKING TRAINING FOR SQUADRON COMMANDERS

by

Jeremy S. Anderson, Lt Col, USAF

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Advisor: Col Ronald Banks

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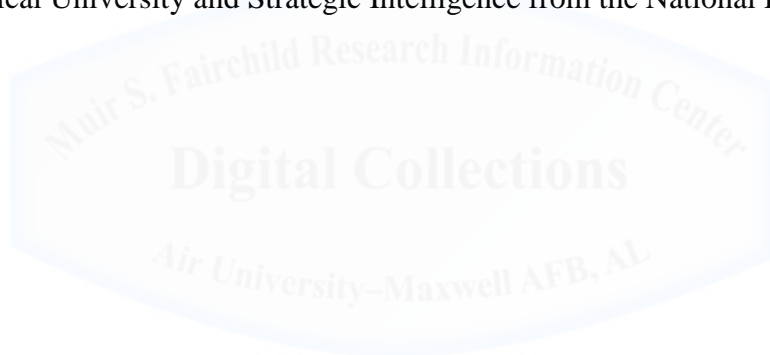
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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Jeremy Anderson is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He is an aircraft maintenance officer and has served in numerous positions maintaining C-141B, HC-130P, F-15C/E, E-3B, F-22A, and B-1 aircraft. He served as a squadron commander in the 366th Component Maintenance Squadron and 366th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho. Lieutenant Colonel Anderson graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and received his commission through the Reserve Officer Training Corps in 1996. Additionally, he has earned Masters of Science Degrees in Aeronautical Science from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University and Strategic Intelligence from the National Defense Intelligence College.



Abstract

Squadron command is a critical position within the United States Air Force, requiring officers selected for command to maximize their expertise and leadership talents to balance near- and long-term objectives in the pursuit of mission execution. Squadron commanders possess enormous influence over the Airmen they lead, the mission they are responsible for, and the resilience of the organization. While officers selected for command have proven their abilities to lead people, solve problems, and develop action plans to overcome future challenges, they are not adequately trained to maximize success during command. Air Force published resources available for soon-to-be commanders are either not current or insufficient. Similarly, the formal pre-command courses officers are required to attend before assuming command do not sufficiently address key strategic leadership concepts that are not only beneficial, but are also required to meet the standards for command as outlined by Air Force Instruction 1-2, *Commander's Responsibilities*. This development shortfall impedes the squadron commander's ability to maximize success during his/her command tour(s). This shortfall not only affects the officer but also the Airman under his/her command and the organization he/she leads. Strategic leadership concepts must be incorporated into pre-command officer development to meet the challenges of today's Air Force.

Introduction

The role of the squadron commander is arguably the most important leadership position in the United States Air Force. Squadron command entails enormous responsibility with legal authority spanning direct and indirect influence of personnel in an effort to achieve near- and long-term mission objectives. In describing the significance of command, Major General Charles Link (retired) stated, “Command is the ultimate service. It is a time when we have the singular responsibility to create and lead strong Air Force units.”¹ The squadron commander has the unique role of working at the grassroots level where the proverbial rubber meets the road to lead and manage day-to-day mission execution while building a cohesive and resilient organization of Airmen to exercise strategic impact. No other Air Force officer has more direct bearing on Airmen or the mission than the squadron commander.

Commanders are charged with the “care and feeding” of their squadrons as they train, organize, and equip Airmen, encompassing a myriad of tasks, processes, and reporting. The commander faces many difficult challenges. When discussing the Air Force’s troubling trend in suicide rates, Airmen “blame being overworked, stressed about their futures and tired of doing more with less.”² Between 2009 and 2012, the aircraft maintenance career field endured 22 percent of the Air Forces total suicides despite making up only 16 percent of the service.³ Three years later the Air Force Times reveals continued challenges in aircraft maintenance with its front page banner, “60-Hour Work Weeks, Maintainer shortage causes chaos, stresses airmen

¹ David L. Goldfein, *Sharing Success Owning Failure*. (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2001), V.

² Markeshia Ricks, “‘Resiliency’ efforts run up against busy AF,” *Air Force Times*, 4 May 2012.

³ Ibid.

and threatens readiness.”⁴ This is just one example of the complex and challenging leadership environment the squadron commander confronts. Taking care of Airmen in today’s Air Force is paramount to mission success and the commander is a key to achieving that end.

The commander is responsible for not only his/her assigned Airmen but also the families of those Airmen. Unlike civilian leaders, the commanders are responsible for the conduct and well-being of their Airmen on- and off-duty. Many times this additional responsibility contributes stressors and time demands commensurate with those required to execute the primary mission. Moreover, commanders possess the legal authority to administer actions of the Uniformed Code of Military Justice and are empowered to make decisions affecting the careers of their Airmen to include courts martial and discharge from service. The squadron commander wears many hats in the performance of his/her duties and must possess strong skill sets across a broad range of activities. Therefore, officers selected for command must be properly developed and educated to succeed in these critical leadership positions. However, a cursory evaluation of pre-command training reveals potential shortcomings in preparing officers for the challenges of command. Does the Air Force adequately train officers on strategic leadership concepts in order to improve their leadership effectiveness in preparation for squadron command? This research paper discusses the importance of command, examines squadron commanders as strategic leaders, assesses the pre-command training regime, and offers recommendations to improve officer development.

Squadron Command

Selection for squadron command is a celebrated milestone in the career of an Air Force officer. It is the first time in the officer’s career when he/she is addressed by the title

⁴ Stephen Losey, “Undermanned but duty bound,” *Air Force Times*, 9 November 2015, cover story.

“commander.” As the commander, the officer is empowered with an unprecedented level of responsibility and autonomy to influence the Airmen he/she leads in the execution of an organization’s mission. In describing command, former Air Force Chief of Staff, General John P. Jumper stated, “[t]he very nature of command is unique to the military; there is no civilian equivalent for this level of trust, authority, and responsibility.”⁵ In his book, *Commanding an Air Force Squadron*, Colonel Timothy Timmons notes, “[t]he commander’s job is unique in the unit; no other job approaches it in scope - the commander exists on his own ‘turf.’”⁶ At no other point in their career will officers have more direct impact on the mission and more influence on developing Airmen. Brigadier General Dan Leaf buttresses Colonel Timmons’ assertion in describing the significance of the position: “[a]s a wing commander, the most important personnel decision I ever made was the selection of my squadron commanders. No other officer would have a greater positive or negative effect on our ability to accomplish the mission.”⁷ There is no doubt the role of squadron commander is crucial to Air Force mission execution, but what exactly is squadron command?

The Air Force squadron is the basic unit of organization for mission execution. With few exceptions, most Airmen are assigned to a squadron and conduct day-to-day activities in support of that squadron and its role in contributing to the greater mission of the group, wing, major command, and Air Force. The Air Force typically deploys squadrons to major conflicts and war in support of national objectives. Squadrons vary in size and complexity depending on the requirements to execute their assigned mission. Whether a squadron possesses 50 personnel or 750 personnel, there is only one commander in charge. From the minute an officer makes the

⁵ David L. Goldfein, *Sharing Success Owning Failure*, vii.

⁶ Timothy T. Timmons, *Commanding An Air Force Squadron*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1993), xix.

⁷ David L. Goldfein, *Sharing Success Owning Failure*, 2.

statement “I assume command” during the change of command ceremony, he/she is the designated leader of the organization. From that moment, commanders are responsible for everything occurring in the squadron. In his book *Sharing Success Owning Failure*, Colonel David Goldfein notes, “[a]s a commander, you will be privileged to share in many successes of your organization; however, you will personally own every failure.”⁸

Air Force officers are leaders by design and are expected to lead people from the time they are commissioned as new lieutenants. As officers progress through various positions, their leadership responsibilities grow, and they in turn develop talents and become better, more experienced leaders. Each new position and corresponding elevation of leadership requires the officer to move beyond comfort zones and adapt to his/her new role and develop additional leadership tools. However, the leadership required of squadron commanders is vastly more difficult and requires a significant shift from the officer’s comfort zone and a substantial increase in leadership skills.

Air Force Instruction (AFI) 1-2 directs, “[c]ommanders will establish and maintain a healthy command climate which fosters good order and discipline, teamwork, cohesion, and trust.”⁹ To successfully fulfill this requirement, commanders must possess not only great leadership skills but also strong social skills to maneuver among Airmen at all rank levels to establish trust, build teams, and create unit cohesion. The commander must be able to effectively employ the squadron leadership team, recognize informal leaders, develop an organization of strong followers, and harness the energy of every Airmen. Additionally, AFI 1-2 requires commanders to improve their units, noting continuous process improvement as the key to highly successful

⁸ David L. Goldfein, *Sharing Success Owning Failure*, ix.

⁹ Air Force Instruction (AFI) 1-2. *Commander’s Responsibilities*, 3.

organizations.¹⁰ Every commander acknowledges the responsibility to leave the unit better than how he/she found it, but how is that defined and what is the unit of measure? To be truly effective, commanders need to understand the concepts of strategic alignment and how to foster an innovative culture. Squadron commanders must be prepared to manage ambiguity and to make critical decisions in the absence of clearly defined data. These are the challenging expectations outlined by the Air Force Chief of Staff in AFI 1-2. The following section provides analysis of two aspects of squadron command, pre-command education and squadron commanders as strategic leaders, and illuminates weaknesses in the Air Force's approach to developing officers to be successful squadron commanders.

Analysis

Pre-Command Education

While there are hundreds of books on leadership and strategic leadership concepts, there are very few works focused specifically on squadron command in the Air Force. The prominent works commonly available were written by Air Force officers as a voluntary effort to contribute helpful information for the new squadron commander. *Commanding an Air Force Squadron* by Colonel Timothy Timmons in 1993, *Commanding an Air Force Squadron in the Twenty-First Century* by Lieutenant Colonel Jeffry Smith in 2003, and *Sharing Success Owning Failure, Preparing to Command in the Twenty-First Century Air Force* by Colonel David Goldfein in 2001 provide a valuable, but dated overview of squadron command to assist officers in framing their new environment and corresponding increase in expectations. In addition to these voluntary efforts, Air University publishes AU-2, *Guidelines For Command*, with the most recent version published in March 2015. Despite its descriptor as "A Handbook on the Leadership of Airmen

¹⁰ AFI 1-2. *Commander's Responsibilities*, 4.

for Air Force Squadron Commanders,”¹¹ even this recent work is deficient in addressing the expectations of AFI 1-2. While helpful in orienting officers to their upcoming responsibility, the 249 page work is best served as a desk drawer reference to be referred to when needed as compared to a leadership preparatory guide for the new commander. The lack of current and sufficient publications to support officers as they prepare for command places increased emphasis on the Air Force’s formal pre-command training.

Surprisingly, the Air Force’s formal pre-command training regime for one of the most important roles in the service is minimal. Currently, officers selected for command attend a one week course sponsored by the Major Command (MAJCOM) in which they have been hired to command. While these courses are helpful in firmly establishing the vastness of the squadron commander’s terrain of responsibilities and introducing the numerous resources available, they do not adequately address the concepts of strategic leadership that will be required as described in AFI 1-2.¹² Instead, they offer a broadly focused agenda, incorporating a myriad of topics similar in content to the Air University’s AU-2, *Guidelines for Command*. Topics include: Key Spouse, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, Public Affairs, readiness, military justice, safety, finance, resiliency, manpower, medical, Inspector General, family advocacy, First Sergeants, Chaplains, and more. The courses do leverage senior mentors, leadership perspectives, and MAJCOM Commander involvement. However, while effective in making commanders more knowledgeable in general, the training does not arm the commander with the intellectual talents to be a better commander and strategic leader.

¹¹ AU-2, *Guidelines for Command* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2015), i.

¹² The author reviewed the agendas and content for pre-command training courses in four MAJCOMs; ACC, PACAF, USAFE and AMC. All courses include mentor sessions with senior leaders and address topics to familiarize new commanders with key Air Force issues and resources available at the base and MAJCOM level.

After interviewing 100 airmen, most of them graduated squadron commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Smith noted in his 2003 book that many commanders viewed the one week formal training course as too short and too broad to prepare them for the responsibilities of command.¹³ In his 2001 book, Colonel David Goldfein described the pre-command training course as a “course focused largely on staying out of jail rather than leading and managing effectively.”¹⁴ Why is there such a disparity between the high regard the Air Force holds for its squadron commanders and the insufficient training to prepare them? The assessment provided by Colonel Goldfein 14 years ago is still valid today, “[t]oo often, command in the Air Force is viewed as a test of the individual for future service rather than an opportunity for the organization to succeed and thrive under proven leadership. This overarching focus on testing the individual rather than the success of the unit has resulted over time in a correspondingly shallow program to formally prepare you for command.”¹⁵

Squadron Commanders as Strategic Leaders

“The focus of strategic leadership is the enduring performance potential of the organization over time so that it will thrive in the long term.”¹⁶ This quote would resonate with all squadron commanders as they diligently navigate daily challenges while working toward a stronger, more resilient organization to better serve Airmen and the Air Force. However, these hard-working commanders would be better served with a more robust leadership education, such as that offered at the Air War College (AWC). The mission of the AWC is to educate officers to serve

¹³ Jeffry F. Smith, *Commanding An Air Force Squadron In The Twenty-First Century*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2003), xii-xiii.

¹⁴ David L. Goldfein, *Sharing Success Owning Failure.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ Richard L. Hughes, Katherine Colarelli Beatty, and David L. Dinwoodie. *Becoming a Strategic Leader*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 11.

as strategic national security leaders.¹⁷ As such it provides the Air Force, sister services, and foreign allied and partner nations with senior leaders educated across a spectrum of curriculum spanning strategic issues. Officers selected to attend the AWC have previously completed their squadron command tours, typically by two or three years, and are Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels. As an AWC student and previous two time squadron commander, this author found many of the concepts introduced during the Joint Strategic Leadership course of study to be very applicable to the squadron command environment. Had this author missed something in the pre-command training? Why was all of this valuable leadership information being offered years too late to impact two squadron command tours? This is no suggestion that officers should attend AWC before becoming squadron commanders. Rather, a small portion of the AWC curriculum is very relevant to developing officers to be squadron commanders.

A review of the existing literature and available training shows there is no deliberate forum or resource to addresses the concepts of strategic leadership to the soon-to-be squadron commander. This shortfall regarding a key development opportunity prompts questions. Is it because squadron commanders are not considered strategic leaders? After all, they do immerse themselves in daily operational issues. However, leading people and improving unit performance is inherently strategic. If every squadron commander just focused on the operational environment, how would he/she establish long-term cohesion and trust and build highly effective organizations based on innovation and strategic alignment as described in AFI 1-2? How would they ensure the squadron they pass to the next commander is truly better than when they took command? And, most importantly, why is the Air Force not focusing more attention on

¹⁷ United States Air Force Air War College, “Air War College Leadership,” 7 December 2015, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/aa_leadership.aspx.

preparing squadron commanders for strategic leadership? Does the Air Force consider squadron commanders to be strategic leaders?

To determine if squadron commanders are viewed as strategic leaders, consider the wide range of requirements and expectations placed on the commander in the performance of his/her duties. While the responsibilities of the squadron commander are immense and difficult to comprehensively list, AFI 1-2, *Commander's Responsibilities* presents these duties in four overarching categories including: Execute the Mission, Lead the People, Manage Resources, and Improve the Unit.¹⁸ While skilled leadership is required in the conduct of all of these duties, two are more operationally focused and management centric while the others are fundamentally more strategic and require advanced leadership acumen to be truly successful. These more challenging and strategic tasks are “Leading the People” and “Improving the Unit.”

Moreover, in discussing whether or not squadron commanders are strategic leaders, it is noteworthy that the title of AFI 1-2 is “*Commander's Responsibilities*.” The instruction does not identify the level of command, but the guidance is applicable to all “commissioned officers holding command positions.”¹⁹ This conscious lack of specificity in the guidance demonstrates the unique impact of the commander at every level of command. Whether at the squadron, group, or wing level, the commander has a strategic impact on the Air Force and should be adequately prepared to excel in the command environment.

By the time an officer is selected for squadron command he/she has demonstrated the abilities to lead day-to-day mission execution, lead teams to solve tough problems, complete complicated projects, and be effective followers. These officers have proven themselves to be strong organizational leaders and are motivated and eager to take the responsibilities of command head

¹⁸ AFI 1-2. *Commander's Responsibilities*, 8 May 2014, 2-5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

on. However, it can be argued that many of them are missing an entire set of tools in their leadership toolbox and are largely unaware of this intellectual gap. As previously illuminated, a common criticism among 100 graduated squadron commanders focused on insufficient formal pre-command preparation.²⁰ While many new commanders will achieve great levels of success as commanders, it is easy to speculate how much more successful they would be if they were better prepared. More importantly than their individual performance, increased preparedness would influence the success of their organization and their Airmen. Effective strategic leaders cultivate an environment of empowered followership directly linked to successful organizational achievement.²¹ While the new commander understands his/her new position will require increased leadership, it is common for operational leaders to underestimate the level of leadership required at the strategic level.²² Where operational leaders focus on their respective areas within the internal environment of an organization, strategic leaders focus on the entire organization and the external environment it exists within.²³ This is the new realm of the squadron commander.

Strategic Leadership Tools for Squadron Commanders

The following sections support the strategic tasks of “Leading the People” and “Improving the Unit” as prescribed in AFI 1-2.²⁴ The two main reference paragraphs for these tasks from the instruction are presented below. For each task, key strategic leadership concepts are presented in an effort to illuminate their utility to squadron commanders in the conduct of their duties. The

²⁰ Jeffry F. Smith, *Commanding An Air Force Squadron In The Twenty-First Century*, xii-xiii.

²¹ Christopher A. Brumm and Sharon Drury, “Leadership that Empowers: How Strategic Planning Relates to Followership,” *Engineering Management Journal* 25, no. 4 (December 2013): 17, 26.

²² James W. Browning, *Leading at the Strategic Level in an Uncertain World* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2013), 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁴ AFI 1-2. *Commander’s Responsibilities*, 2.

intent is not to comprehensively discuss each concept, but instead to provide a brief overview to validate their relevance and potential for future inclusion in officer pre-command development.

Lead the People

Effectively leading people is the art of command. Commanders must maintain effective communication processes and ensure unit members are well disciplined, trained and developed. At all times, commanders must lead by personal example and pay judicious attention to the welfare and morale of their subordinates. Commanders will enforce the Air Force cultural standards on conduct, performance, and discipline outlined in AFI 1-1, *Air Force Standards*. Further, commanders will establish and maintain a healthy command climate which fosters good order and discipline, teamwork, cohesion and trust. A healthy climate ensures members are treated with dignity, respect, and inclusion, and does not tolerate harassment, assault, or unlawful discrimination of any kind.²⁵

AFI 1-2, Paragraph 3.2

In addition to the main reference above, five subparagraphs expound on the responsibilities of communication, discipline, training, development, and quality of life engagement.²⁶ To successfully fulfill these requirements, squadron commanders should be educated in the concepts of self-awareness and emotional intelligence, developing a strategic leadership team, and strategic communication.

Self-Awareness and Emotional Intelligence

Self-awareness is about knowing your talents, being at ease with who you are, and understanding the impact of your interactions with those around you. Increased awareness of your abilities allows you to leverage your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses in the execution of your duties.²⁷ The newly minted squadron commander will be unable to fully bring his/her talents to bear in support of the squadron unless he/she has a “high degree of objective self-awareness and understanding.”²⁸ However, developing self-awareness can be difficult for

²⁵ AFI 1-2. *Commander's Responsibilities*, 2-3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution* (New York: Crown Business, 2002), 81.

²⁸ James W. Browning, *Leading at the Strategic Level in an Uncertain World*, 134.

leaders due to the daily pressures of establishing themselves early in their careers.²⁹ For this reason, deliberate focus and training are needed for officers before they assume command.

It is also important to understand how your own emotions affect your performance as well as how they can affect those around you. Even if able to perform everything else perfectly, if the squadron commander is not able to recognize and drive emotions in the right direction, he/she will fall short of their potential.³⁰ Understanding the power of emotions has been termed Emotional Intelligence (EI).³¹ EI comprises two competencies, Personal and Social. Personal Competence includes the capabilities for leaders to manage themselves through self-awareness and self-management.³² Social Competence includes the capabilities for how leaders manage relationships through social awareness and relationship management.³³ EI enables the leader to “generate excitement, optimism, and passion for the job ahead, as well as to cultivate an atmosphere of cooperation and trust.”³⁴ To perform at their absolute best, squadron commanders need to be self-aware and have a strong understanding of EI.

Strategic Leadership Teams

“In the world of strategic leadership, it is clear that no single person can do what is needed to achieve the enduring performance potential of the organization.”³⁵ This is true of the squadron commander, who is immersed in numerous challenges on any given day that will hamper the ability to advance organizational strategic ambitions. While officers are often part of teams or

²⁹ Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew N. McLean, and Diana Mayer. “Discovering Your Authentic Leadership.” *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007, 3. <http://www.hbr.org>.

³⁰ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee. *Primal Leadership* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³² *Ibid.*, 39.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee. *Primal Leadership*, 29-30.

³⁵ Richard L. Hughes, Katherine Colarelli Beatty, and David L. Dinwoodie. *Becoming a Strategic Leader*, 42.

have led teams to solve problems, the squadron commander is responsible for building and developing his/her own team. It is critical for squadron commanders to understand how important this task is. The squadron commander will be overwhelmed and ineffective if he/she does not cultivate a team to help advance his/her strategic communication and vision for the unit.

Strategic leadership teams are different from ordinary teams in that they are focused on the long-term success of the organization.³⁶ While the commander will have a staff and cast of subordinate leaders to carryout day-to-day procedures, the strategic leadership team should be a carefully selected group of trusted senior leaders. In this role, the strategic leadership team provides an important body of expertise and counsel to synthesize information for the squadron commander. Strategic leadership functions include: information-sharing, consultation, coordinating, and decision-making.³⁷ “Through careful planning, screening, intuition, and emotional intelligence, the team leader [squadron commander] must help the team build shared values, frames of reference, and views of organizational strategy, direction, and desired outcomes.”³⁸

Strategic Communication

“When we select our commanders, we expect them to create a vision and motivate and inspire their people toward that vision.”³⁹ The squadron commander must develop a strong, cohesive and deliberate communication campaign, focusing both internally and externally to socialize his/her vision and corresponding strategy to achieve that vision. The commander’s vision will grow roots when people understand and support it and those roots will ensure the progress made

³⁶ Richard L. Hughes, Katherine Colarelli Beatty, and David L. Dinwoodie. *Becoming a Strategic Leader*, 198.

³⁷ James W. Browning, *Leading at the Strategic Level in an Uncertain World*, 226.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁹ AU-24, *Concepts for Air Force Leadership* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2008), 103. Quote taken from article prepared for inclusion in AU-24 by General John Michael Loh.

endures in the face of change.⁴⁰ Additionally, the strategy itself is most effective when it involves the aspirations and emotions of the individuals directly supporting it.⁴¹ While the squadron commander is, and must be perceived as, the leader of the unit's strategy, the commander must leverage the strategic leadership team as well as informal leaders to ensure communication efficacy. This includes formal events such as squadron commander's calls and smaller group roll calls, not to mention incorporation of elevator speeches when engaging with Airmen in small groups in their work centers. The squadron commander cannot underestimate the power of communication.

Improve the Unit

Continuous process improvement is the hallmark of highly successful organizations. Wasteful, ineffective or unsafe ways of doing business cannot be tolerated. Commanders must foster a culture of innovation and challenge inefficiencies. A process for identifying and fixing deficiencies should be established and followed. Commanders must make data-driven decisions and manage risk while ensuring their unit's authorities, missions, plans and goals stay strategically aligned. A robust self-assessment program will identify the root cause of deficiencies and enable sharing of best practices with other organizations. Commanders are also expected to inspect their units and subordinates to ensure maximum effectiveness, efficiency, economy and discipline of the force are maintained. Commanders should strive to leave their unit better than they found it.⁴²

AFI 1-2, Paragraph 3.4

In addition to this main paragraph, four subparagraphs including strategic alignment, process operations, commander's inspection program, and data-driven decisions expound on the commander's responsibilities.⁴³ To successfully fulfill these requirements, squadron commanders should be educated, at a minimum, in the concepts of building a culture of innovation, critical thinking, and strategic alignment.

⁴⁰ Gen Stephen R. Lorenz, *Lorenz on Leadership: Lessons on Effectively Leading People, Teams and Organizations* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2012), 50.

⁴¹ Richard L. Hughes, Katherine Colarelli Beatty, and David L. Dinwoodie. *Becoming a Strategic Leader*, 25.

⁴² AFI 1-2. *Commander's Responsibilities*, 4.

⁴³ AFI 1-2. *Commander's Responsibilities*, 4-5.

Innovative Culture

Innovation can be defined as the act of creating and employing something value-added to an organization.⁴⁴ In resource-constrained environments, innovation can provide solutions and overcome inefficiencies as well as create a foundation for continuous process improvement. Research has demonstrated that leadership behavior contributes from 20 percent to 67 percent of the climate for organizational creativity.⁴⁵ The squadron commander is essential to creating and sustaining a culture of innovation. To be successful he/she must understand innovative-thinking skills such as paying attention, personalizing, imaging, collaborative inquiry, and crafting.⁴⁶ To be truly innovative, squadrons must become learning organizations. Learning organizations promote the intellectual capital of all members, and squadron commanders must develop methods and processes to leverage the innovative thinking of all personnel, regardless of rank or position. “The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization.”⁴⁷ The targeted efforts of AFSO 21 (Air Force Smart Operation for the 21st Century) fall far short of innovative leadership education for the squadron commander. Their impact on their unit’s ability to be innovative and establish priorities to promote organizational learning is critical.

Critical Thinking

⁴⁴ David Magellan Horth and Jonathan Vehar, “Innovation, How Leadership Makes the Difference,” Center for Creative Leadership, 3. <http://www.insights.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/innovation.Difference.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ David Horth and Dan Buchner, “Innovation Leadership, How to Use Innovation to Lead Effectively, Work Collaboratively, and Drive Results,” Center for Creative Leadership, 9-10. <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/InnovationLeadership.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Science of the Learning Organization* (New York, NY: Currency and Doubleday, 1990), 4.

The single most important skill for strategic leaders is critical thinking.⁴⁸ “Critical thinking is a logical process of narrowing down ideas, concepts, and choices.”⁴⁹ Squadron commanders are engrossed in challenges spanning the spectrum of decision difficulty and must understand how to harness and employ critical thinking. Critical thinking can be engaged to overcome ambiguous and complex problems. This sounds easy enough, however a study revealed only 4 percent of the United States workforce was competent in strategic thinking skills.⁵⁰ Additionally, individuals who have worked for an organization for a number of years and have become immersed in policy guidance and standard procedures can become “fixed” in their environment and inhibited from creative thought.⁵¹ Military leaders face this problem not only for themselves, but also for the people they lead. The deliberate implementation of critical or strategic thinking enables the leader to achieve perspective that rises above the daily churn of crisis management.⁵² This is crucial to achieving the task of improving the unit. Obtaining this strategic perspective incorporates the skills of scanning, envisioning, and reframing to analyze the current environment and develop future outcomes.⁵³ Squadron commanders must learn how to harness critical thinking and promote its benefits through the strategic leadership team.

⁴⁸ AU-24, *Concepts for Air Force Leadership*, 271.

⁴⁹ James W. Browning, *Leading at the Strategic Level in an Uncertain World*, 84.

⁵⁰ Peter Linkow, “What Gifted Strategic Thinkers Do,” *Training and Development*, July 1999, 34.

⁵¹ James W. Browning, *Leading at the Strategic Level in an Uncertain World*, 80.

⁵² Brent Davies and Barbara J. Davies, “The Nature and Dimensions of Strategic Leadership,” *ISEA* 38, no. 1 (November 2010): 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

Strategic Alignment

“Alignment exists when the decisions and tactics throughout the organization are coordinated, coherent, and consistent with overall strategy.”⁵⁴ Squadron commanders can ensure strategic alignment by setting clear priorities.⁵⁵ This handful of priorities or “strategic drivers” helps to maintain the desired path of the organization when internal or external pressures threaten to slow or alter course.⁵⁶ When communicated effectively as part of the strategic communication plan, priorities establish a framework for subordinate leaders to maneuver within. This ensures short- and long-term decisions are consistent, policies are complementary, and actions fit within the understood framework. While not difficult to comprehend, strategic alignment is important for the squadron commander to understand because it requires deliberate thought and careful conditioning in a turbulent environment of constant distractions. Strategic alignment should provide the outline for the strategic communication plan.

Recommendations

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates officers selected for squadron command are in need of more in-depth education, including, at a minimum, the strategic leadership concepts outlined in the preceding sections. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force has provided clear and challenging expectations in AFI 1-2, *Commander's Responsibilities*, which require officers to understand and employ unfamiliar concepts or concepts requiring further study to ensure unit success. The following recommendations are posed in an effort to better prepare officers for command:

⁵⁴ Richard L. Hughes, Katherine Colarelli Beatty, and David L. Dinwoodie. *Becoming a Strategic Leader*, 43.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

- **First recommendation:** the Air Force should conduct a study to determine a baseline of strategic education required for squadron commanders.
- **Second recommendation:** all pre-command training courses should be standardized to the requirements identified in the above study.
- **Third recommendation:** MAJCOMs should review their pre-command course content and make adjustments necessary to support the requirements in AFI 1-2.
- **Fourth recommendation:** Air University should replace the current AU-2, Guidelines For Command, with a version containing strategic leadership concepts necessary for command as outlined in AFI 1-2.
- **Fifth recommendation:** Make a hard copy of the revised version of AU-2 available to officers selected for command immediately upon their selection.
- **Sixth recommendation:** Air University should establish a Leadership Center of Excellence to serve as the focal point for leadership development, assessing and standardizing leadership courses, and developing curriculum.

Conclusion

“It is truly an honor to be selected for command in the U.S. Air Force. Your challenge is to be worthy of that honor.”⁵⁷ This quote by former Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. Jumper illuminates two important elements regarding command. While the first sentence highlights the honor of selection, the second sentence emphasizes the individual responsibility to earn the honor of command through job performance. Squadron commanders have a personal responsibility to lead by example, achieve daily mission success, build strong and resilient units, and lead change to overcome current challenges while looking forward to anticipate future

⁵⁷ David L. Goldfein, *Sharing Success Owning Failure*, 109.

challenges. They must address complex issues facing the Air Force, such as troubling suicide rates, manning shortfalls, decreasing resources, and increasing operations tempo. Commanders wear the hats of guidance counselor, cheerleader, standards enforcer, team builder, motivational speaker, and many more. It is for these reasons that the Air Force places its squadron commanders on a pedestal within the leadership hierarchy. However, the Air Force is not adequately preparing officers for the demands of squadron command. While many graduated squadron commanders can claim success during their tenures in command, their lack of education regarding strategic leadership concepts potentially impede their success, the success of their Airmen as well as their organizations. This paper offers six recommendations that will appropriately increase the capabilities of officers as they prepare to earn the honor of being selected for squadron command.



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